

Writing Activities

These writing activities are adapted from those described in *Classroom Assessment Techniques* by T.A. Angelo and K.P. Cross.

A few tidbits:

- Before using one of these assignments in your class, try it yourself to see if it works or needs modification. These activities work best when you modify them to fit your course design and course goals.
- Providing clear instructions, modeling the thinking processes involved, and/or discussing a sample will help students understand what you are looking for and the purpose of the assignment.
- Don't be surprised if students don't write good responses the first time. They'll get better with practice.
- You can grade many of these using minimal marking (–, ✓, +) and a couple brief comments. When you write comments, keep in mind the type of thinking that you are trying to promote and focus your comments on how well students succeeded.
- Students can learn from each other by discussing their responses in small groups. Or, they can complete the assignment collaboratively.

Pro/Con Grid

Students make a list of the costs & benefits or the advantages & disadvantages of an issue. This assignment helps develop their ability to **analyze**, draw **inferences**, and **evaluate**. It also helps students move beyond a one-sided approach and to consider issues from more than one perspective.

- ☞ Ask students to list the pros and cons or advantages and disadvantages of an issue, public policy decision, technical solution, or ethical dilemma. You may want to ask students to take a certain point of view. (A more complex assignment would be to give them two viewpoints, e.g., customer and salesperson, and have them create two grids, one from each perspective.) Tell students how many responses they should have for each side and how they should be written (complete sentences or phrases?).

Concept Maps

Students draw or diagram the mental connections that they make between a concept and other concepts they have learned. Students develop their abilities to draw **inferences**, **integrate** information, and think holistically. The shape of the Concept Map will depend on the type of relationships among concepts. The shape may be a tree, flowchart, geographic-type map, or a wheel with spokes.

- ☞ Ask students to brainstorm for several minutes on a stimulus or a starting point for the Concept Map. Then, using their brainstorm list, they draw a Concept Map. The stimulus or starting point is often in the center and the position of the other concepts show primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of association. You can ask them to use a particular shape or let them decide which works best for them.

“What, How, Why” or “Content, Form, Function” Outline

Students outline a reading or other “text” such as an advertisement, radio/television commercial or program, graphic design, etc. The outline goes beyond the traditional content outline by requiring students to **analyze** the text’s form and function. Students develop their analytic, reading, and writing skills. This assignment lends itself to courses that focus on written, oral, or visual communication.

- ☞ Choose a short text, passage, or film clip that is clearly structured in a form that is common to that genre. You may want to mark subsections so that students will divide the text into the same subsections. Ask students to complete a “Content, Form, Function” outline for the text. You can also require students to write a brief paragraph that **judges** the piece’s effectiveness or **hypothesizes** the impact of the piece on different audiences.

Many students have never thought about form and function before. A demonstration that models the process the students should use will probably be necessary.

Sample format

Section (page reference, section title, or time sequence)	Content (What?)	Form (How?)	Function/Purpose (Why?)

Invented Dialogues

Students synthesize their knowledge of theory, important issues, and possibly personalities and historical periods by writing a dialogue. They develop their ability to draw **inferences**, think **creatively**, and **integrate** information and ideas. This activity is especially useful in the humanities and social sciences.

- ☞ There are two types of dialogue assignments. (1) Students weave together quotes from actual sources. (2) Students create an exchange between two people (fictional or non-fictional) or between themselves and someone else.

Ask students to write a short dialogue—ten to twenty exchanges—on a controversial issue, a theory, or a decision that lends itself to the dialogue format. Provide a handout with possible topics, length guidelines, and criteria for a successful dialogue. Encourage students to read their drafts out loud to themselves before submitting the final version.

Documented Problem Solutions

Students become better **problem-solvers** by documenting each step they take while solving a problem. They also begin to learn discipline-specific **metacognitive** skills. You can see at what point students have difficulty applying a technique or principle to a new situation. This activity is especially useful in courses such as accounting, computer programing, statistics, logic, and chemistry.

- ☞ Give students one, two, or three problems to solve. As part of the assignment, ask students to write out the steps they took to complete the assignment. Let them know that in this exercise it’s more important to explain their steps and their reasoning than to get the right answer.