Writing to Learn

Common Writing Assumptions

Most of us of us share several assumptions about academic writing. These typically include some form of the following:

- Well educated people can write well.
- Writing and critical thinking are related.
- Writing is important.
- Writing can be taught [by English teachers].
- Students should write more.
- Students should write better.
- _____
- _____

Common Writing Myths

Our assumptions about writing and its importance to academic pursuits tend to support several corollary myths about writing as an academic endeavor. These myths include the following:

- Writing should be taught in English class.
- Writing assignments take too much time.
- Writing can't be assigned in large classes.
- Teaching grammar improves writing.
- Correcting errors improves writing.
- Writing evaluation is subjective.
- _____
- _____

The Truth about Writing

Writing researchers and scholars know that these myths are false and misleading. The truth about writing in the classroom is that:

- Writing assignments can be quick and easy.
- Good writing requires context and purpose.
- Teaching grammar doesn't improve writing.
- Writers need readers, not grammarians.
- Writing shouldn't always be evaluated.
- Writing improves writing.

What Is Writing to Learn?

Traditionally, writing is viewed as a tool for assessing learning. Because writing reflects cognitive processes, it is typically used to assess higher level learning and critical thinking skills. In this context, writing is always evaluated and is expected to be "good." In its role as an assessment tool,

writing should be clear, correct, accurate, logical, etc. This is high stakes writing, and examples include term papers and essay exams.

Writing to Learn (WTL) activities have an entirely different purpose. In this context, the goal is not good writing, but good learning. The purpose of WTL is to understand, to remember, and to figure out what you don't know yet. This writing promotes student engagement in learning, and it need not be good as writing. This is low stakes writing. It can be entirely private, shared, or graded.

Writing to Learn activities can be assigned in many forms, including the following:

- In-class writing
- Journal writing
- Exploratory writing
- Essays/papers that are revised
- Portfolios

Examples of WTL Activities

In-class activities: Have students write a paragraph that:

- Defines a concept you've presented
- Applies a principle to the students' experience
- Makes connections with previous learning
- Summarizes today's lecture or assigned reading
- Translates a principle into a word problem

Homework assignments: Ask students to prepare the reading for class by writing two or three questions that the reading addresses or several statements that represent "leading ideas" in the reading.

"Quizzes": Five minutes before the end of class, ask students to write a paragraph that summarizes the main points of the lecture. Then have several students read their paragraphs.

Journals: Reading, lecture, or thinking journals are all effective tools for engagement and learning. Journal writing helps students connect what they're learning with the rest of their experience. Journals should be "safe" spaces for student writing, so set minimum word limits but keep stakes low. You can spot check, browse, read, or respond; or you can have students exchange journals for peer response.

Exploratory writing assignments: Assign weekly writing about the reading, homework, or issues you want students to consider more carefully. For example, ask students to:

- Compare two concepts from the reading
- Compare a concept from the reading to some experience from their lives
- Work out a definition in writing

What's in It for You?

Writing to Learn activities will help you gauge what students understand and where they need help. This enables you to act immediately to improve students' learning ***before*** assessment. Consequently, your teaching will become more effective. You'll also enjoy teaching more since the quality of the work you receive from students will improve. As they gain skill with Writing to Learn, they will become better communicators and more able to share their thinking with you.

Responding to Writing to Learn

In keeping with their purpose, WTL activities aren't usually marked for correctness. A variety of response options are effective, including:

- Private writing gives student the safety to gain fluency, & their writing will improve rapidly.
- Remember that you're not teaching a writing course.
- If you want to respond, consider high-level comments, such as straight lines beside strong passages, waving lines beside weak passages, and Xs beside things that are plainly incorrect.

Detailed corrections aren't necessary and may not help. Instead, respond as an interested, intelligent ***reader***. Try to apply the following guidelines to your responses:

- You don't have to explain why something is poorly written or how to fix it.
- You don't need to use grammar terms.
- If a passage is unclear or confusing, say so.
- Student will appreciate and respond to your close reading of their writing.
- Keep your response consistent with your goals for the assignment or activity.
- Don't penalize for errors in in-class writing, exploratory writing, and journals.
- Good writing evolves; use WTL activities to build more formal writing assignments.
- Demand clear, well-organized writing and careful editing for formal, revised writing.
- You don't have to accept unacceptable writing; tell students to fix errors and resubmit.

Attitude Is a Powerful Tool

You can improve your students' writing by your attitude. If you ignore writing as a way of learning and knowing, your students will too. Here are some ways you can demonstrate your attitude toward writing:

- Let students know that you use and value writing.
- Tell students how your handle writing tasks.
- Focus on communication versus correctness.
- Stop thinking of good writing as a commodity.
- Instead, view writing as thinking.