

Writing to Learn Activities

Anticipants

Give students the beginning or the end of a report, paragraph, story, case study, or problem, and then give them fifteen minutes to write what follows or leads up to the statement. This brief exercise, which can be used for in-class work, helps students do the kind of goal-directed predicting and planning common to skilled writers.

Class Minutes

Assign a class scribe for the day who will be responsible for summarizing class discussion and activities during the first five minutes of the next day's class. Or have two people serve as independent scribes; invite the class to discuss the differences in the minutes they produce.

Interruptions

Ask students to stop and write when you feel they may need a moment to focus attention, assimilate information, or articulate a question. Use these short writings to refocus class discussion.

Reading Logs

Ask students to keep a notebook designed to help them understand their reading assignments better and to demonstrate to them that critical reading is an active process. First, introduce them to the "Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review, Write" method for improving reading habits and ask them to practice it regularly in their reading journals. As they survey the reading assignment, they should note large headings, the first sentence of each paragraph, and the first and last paragraphs of the assigned text. At this point, they should record in their notebooks answers to the following questions:

- What is the main subject or topic of this text?
- What do I expect the major points to be in discussing this topic?
- What questions do I have that I hope will be answered by this text?

Students then read "with a purpose," i.e., to answer their questions and to see whether hypotheses are confirmed or denied--which is what good readers do. After they have read the text and attempted to answer the questions, they should review the material, noting whether the major points and key questions they identified turned out to be accurate. Finally, they should write in their notebooks answers to the questions they posed.

Writing Logs

Ask students to keep and submit at regular intervals a writing process log in which they address the following questions:

- How did you arrive at your topic?
- When did you first begin to think about the assignment?
- How long did it take to complete the assignment (including time spent learning and revising)?
- What kind of planning or investigating did you do?
- Where did you write the first draft? Subsequent drafts? (Briefly describe the settings)
- Who is the audience for this piece of writing?
- What is your relationship to the audience?
- What do you see as the major strengths of your essay?
- What do you see as the weaknesses of the essay?
- What would you like to change about your process of writing or about this piece of writing?

Focused Questioning

Have students articulate places where they got stuck and how they solved their dilemmas, whether the problems be found in comprehending outside readings or in working on homework assignments. This strategy can also be effective in pinpointing the source of writer's block; when students feel stuck, leaving the primary task and writing a journal entry about where they think the problems come from can stimulate fresh thinking.

Idea Exchange

Have students write a concept or a sentence/short passage from the text across the top of a sheet of paper. Student #1 responds to the passage in the left-hand column; students then exchange papers with the second student responding to Student #1's comments with her own in the left-hand column. They may want to exchange papers several times until they have exhausted their ideas on the subject.

The Problem Statement

Instructors usually set up problems and ask students to provide solutions. Two alternatives to this standard procedure will give students practice with both framing and solving problems. After you introduce a new concept in your course, ask students to write out a theoretical or practical problem that the concept might help to solve. Students can exchange these problems and write out solutions, thus ensuring that they understand the concept clearly and fully. (Another version of this exercise is to have students write a problem statement that is passed on to another student whose job it is to answer it. Such peer answers are especially useful in large classes.)

Compacts

Have students write a two or three-page essay on a key course concept, process, or application. You might want to assign different groups different topics, possibly according to last names (e.g., A-E, F-J, K-O, etc.). The day they bring their essays to class, have them condense the three-page essay into a one-page essay, an act that underscores the importance of writing concisely and precisely. Then have the students in each group read each others' one-page essays and write a group paper that combines the best of everyone's ideas but does not exceed one page.

You can collect these and quickly scan over them to gauge students' level of understanding. In the next class, put these group papers on an overhead transparency and let the class comment on their effectiveness, both in terms of the writing and the content. This activity gives students practice in revision, synthesis, and peer review and reinforces key course concepts.

Letters

Art Young of Clemson University has suggested that students correspond with each other about questions or concerns they have with course readings. For example, a student having trouble understanding the intricacies of photosynthesis might find that his or her correspondent understands the concepts and is able to explain them. This activity works especially well in large lecture courses, where students often don't have the chance to ask all of their questions during class. It also promotes student collegiality and fosters a sense of shared inquiry. If possible, you should collect these letters and read them, responding if you wish but not grading them based on correctness. Knowing you will read the letters prompts students to take them more seriously; reading them also gives you a better sense of which concepts that students are having difficulty understanding.

Reading Response Questions

Ask students to keep and submit at regular intervals a reading response journal in which they address the following questions:

- Summarize, as briefly as possible, what you have read.
- Describe how the reading has made you feel, explaining why whenever possible.
- What are your other responses to what you have read?
- What has this reading made you think about?
- What has this reading suggested you might want to write about?

Short-Answer Quizzes

Ask students to write a short answer to a question from their reading or class discussion. You may ask the students to explain a process, summarize a point, define a term, or apply a concept.

Concept Metaphors

Ask students to think through a concept by creating a metaphor, building a model, or creating a definition for it. For example, in a dentistry class, students may create a metaphor for "teeth" (teeth are crystal castles), build a conceptual model for the structures of caries, and write a definition of "decay." Students may use the metaphor to build a theory about their experience.

Study Questions

Ask students to write their own study questions, "exam" questions, or word problems on the material being covered and to work together to answer them.

Notebook or Journal Writing

Requiring students to keep a notebook, journal, or log and to write in it informally on a regular basis is an excellent way to assign widely diverse kinds of writing activities in a casual way. Journals are highly adaptable and versatile: you can have students write in them regularly or sporadically, in class and out of class. In addition to the assignments below, think about using the journals for any or all of the in-class tasks described above, or perhaps about assigning weekly out-of-class study questions or exercises from the class textbook.

You can collect the notebooks periodically to respond to them. As with all the Writing-to-Learn activities, don't feel that you must "grade" these notebooks, but do respond naturally to what students say and suggest ways they can be even more insightful. Alternatively, don't make comments at all--just collect them and note briefly how complete the entries are.

Observation Reports

Ask students to do a bit of field research, taking careful field notes on whatever they choose to observe: a physical object, person or animal, process, event, or phenomenon. Students can then compare these notes and question one another about what may be missing.

Problem Generating

Have students generate "problems" from the reading or class discussions. Generating problems is often harder than solving them, and so this activity forces students to articulate key issues or questions. One way to do this might be to have math or physics students take a formula or theorem and create a scenario or word problem, which would require using the formula. In a history class, students might write journal entries that consist simply of lists of questions from the outside reading that they would pose to the author of the piece or offer up for class discussion.

Response or "Position" Papers

Have students write a short (1-5 pp.) response paper to an assigned reading, a film, or an issue that comes up in discussion. These response papers are most effective if the class itself is the audience. The main objective of the assignment is not to "perform"--i.e., to prove a thesis statement about the reading--but rather to formulate a response to a work and share it with the class. Not surprisingly, you will find that students who write such responses are more prepared for discussion and more engaged with the material. The way you use the papers in class can be quite informal or more formal, e.g., you might have students trade papers and write responses back to each other.

Interview-Based Research

Having students perform interviews and report on them is one way to make assignments a bit less workaday: students can't just make one pass through the library and say they've completed their research. Talking to people is an invigorating, frustrating, and rewarding experience that can breathe life into what might otherwise seem like a dreary assignment. Like the assignments above, interviews can be integrated with other assignments. Interviews can of course be used to develop information for the content of a traditional assignment. But there are other uses for interviews as well. One possibility is to have students interview professionals in their fields, in order to gain a wider, professional viewpoint on their future careers: a business student can interview an accountant or a technical writer; a chemistry student could interview a chemist working in an analytical development laboratory for a local pharmaceutical company.

Scenarios

Create a scenario that requires students to take on a particular role in a situation. This gives students a specific audience, which forces them to consider carefully the rhetorical situation and make relevant choices. It also reduces the tendency for students to write only to a teacher. Here are some examples to spark your thinking:

History: You are in the United States in 1944. You have a brother on the front lines in France. Write him a five-page letter to tell him what's going on in the U.S. Remember that your brother will want to hear about both local and national politics, as well as more domestic social and familial issues. (Modern Art: You are an art critic for the Columbus Dispatch. Visit the Columbus Museum of Art's newest special exhibit and write a review. You may wish to examine past issues of the Dispatch to see the most commonly used formats and critical conventions.)

Critiques or Reviews

Asking students to critique published works can accomplish several goals. It requires them to examine texts analytically and develop criteria for evaluation, and it helps them to question the assumed authority of a published text. Critiques can be assignments in and of themselves, or they can contribute to a larger project a student is working on. In this way, the student sees the critique as a steppingstone, a way of synthesizing several works for a project. It helps them examine and understand disciplinary conventions, for identifying such conventions is a necessary part of developing evaluative criteria. You may want to have students review something that will also be discussed in class, or you may use the review as a way of getting them to do significant reading outside of class parameters and then incorporating this reading into class. In the latter way, students can report orally on the work they critiqued, thereby giving other students a wider sense of what's going on in the field.

Annotated Bibliographies

Annotated bibliographies are lists of published (or manuscript) works and focused summaries thereof. Composing them helps teach several skills: how to sort through research and select appropriate citations; how to summarize and paraphrase, especially for particular, focused purposes; and how to present summarized material. Keep in mind, however, that not all students will have done annotations before and may need explicit instruction in how to do the tasks mentioned above. Annotated bibliographies provide students an intensive opportunity to become acquainted with the literature in a particular field or on a certain topic. They can work very well in helping students work toward a larger project that requires understanding of secondary sources, or they can function as individual assignments. As with the critiques, it can be valuable to share copies of them with the entire class, especially if the course is mostly composed of majors who will be taking more courses in the area.

Writing Definitions

Students often claim to lack knowledge of or attitudes towards the topics they study. One way to illustrate that they bring knowledge and attitudes to their studies is to ask them to write on a concept before it is discussed in class. For example, if you are reading a feminist article by a female author who is lamenting that her work, because of its feminine subject matter, is discounted by the long established patriarchal publishing world, you might ask students to write about the word authenticity. What is authentic?

After asking several students to read their definitions, you then bring the discussion around to the search for a writer's authentic voice (the unique angle of vision that informs a work) and the societal standards that have confined and perhaps even silenced those voices. If the discussion is on love, you might ask them to write about vulnerability. The point is to get them to see connections (that's why you don't want them to write directly on the topic), to circle around, always broadening their perspectives based on what they already know and/or think.

Collaborative Revision

Ask students to work together revising a document that has already been written. This is a useful activity for work on focus, organization, support, and use of jargon. You might have them rewrite something for a different purpose or audience. You have the option of having them sit down together cold or work individually on the document beforehand and then pool their suggested changes.

Assignment Paraphrase

Ask students to write a 3-4 sentence paraphrase of the assignment. Several students can read them aloud, and the class can discuss the degree to which it reflects the work they've been asked to perform. This helps ensure that students understand writing assignments.

Assignment Cover Sheet

On the day students turn in a paper, have them write for 5-10 minutes, reflecting on the paper. What problems and concerns did they have? What insights did they attain? Ask them to pose 1-2 specific questions for the grader to respond to. Cover sheets can give you a good sense of the kinds of problems students had and make responding easier and more focused.

Counter-arguments

If an argument has been raised in class or the reading, or more than one theory has been advanced, stop for 5 minutes and allow students to write down all the counter-arguments or evidence, or present the case for accepting one theory over another. Identifying multiple sides of an argument helps students develop critical thinking skills by enabling them to identify strengths and weaknesses in arguments.

Response to the Response

After handing back a graded assignment, ask students to respond for 5 minutes after reading the teacher's comments. Ask them to identify one strength and one area to work on that is evident from the comments. This will encourage students to look at and consider the instructor's comments.

The Believing and Doubting Game

First espoused by Peter Elbow, this writing activity simply calls for students to write briefly first, in support of an idea, concept, methodology, thesis; second, in opposition to it. As students complete this writing activity based on a course reading or controversy in the field, they become more adept at understanding the complexity of issues and arguments.

Speed Dating a Thesis Statement

For this activity, have students bring in a draft of their proposed thesis typed on the top of an otherwise blank page. After a short introduction about what you expect from their thesis statements, post questions on the board for other students to answer about their colleagues' statements. Begin swapping (the easiest way is to collect them all, hand them out in a different order, and then just facilitate their rotation; this way you get to check up on their comments and help direct them if necessary). Students should only keep each draft for about five minutes.

What Counts as a Fact?

Select two or more treatments of the same issue, problem, or research. For example, you might bring in an article on a new diet drug from USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, and the Journal of Dietetics. Ask students to write about what constitutes proof or facts in each article and explain why the articles draw on different kinds of evidence, as well as the amount of evidence that supports stated conclusions.

Alternatively, ask students to look at a range of publications within a discipline--trade journals, press releases, scientific reports, first-person narratives, and so on. Have them ask the same kinds of questions about evidence and the range of choices writers make as they develop and support arguments in your field.

Passing Notes in Class

This activity offers an informal writing opportunity for students to identify, interrogate, and develop things they did and did not understand about the content of the course. At the beginning of class, ask every student to tear out a piece of notebook paper and write a note to another student in the class inquiring about some aspect of the course about which they are unclear. Run class as normal but allow students to pass these notes back and forth to each other as class continues. (Warn them that you will collect them at the end of the day so they must be on topic).

Near the end of the class time, ask them what issues came up as they were writing and if anyone was able to respond to their questions satisfactorily. As a group, you may be able to resolve some of their concerns. Alternatively, read over the notes later during your prep time so that you can integrate their concerns into later course content.

Opening

At the beginning of class, pose a question related to a topic you have planned for the class to discuss. For example, ask the class to write on the following question: "How would you evaluate the evidence used to support argument X?" or "How would you describe the tone of essay X?" The five-minute writing will serve as a warm-up and provoke students to do some thinking, even if they only discover that they don't quite know what "tone" means. You can develop the discussion from there.

Closing

At the end of class, ask a question that can provide a starting place for the next class. For example, "What did you learn today about theatrical elements in Act III of Hamlet?" or "What questions were left unanswered for you in our discussion of the kinds of tissue in the human body?"