

Writing for Learning and Growth

There are many kinds of writing assignments which call forth rich learning and growth in students while not necessarily taxing their time in completing the assignments or yours in commenting upon and grading them. Indeed, many writing experts argue that students benefit much more from a series of shorter, context-appropriate assignments than one big end-of-term project. Think of writing as a mode of learning: writing *makes students think* and consequently *makes students learn*.

A few general principles for creating good writing-to-learn assignments:

- Articulate the desired learning and thinking precisely: “the purpose of this assignment is for you to apply spectrum analysis techniques to a specific star you choose to study” (astronomy); “describe a Jungian archetype present in your favorite TV show” (psychology); “paraphrase the key assertion in chapter 3.”
- Provide genre and format constraints: “write one coherent paragraph”; “in one page, do two things: find the earliest OED definition of a key word in the poem and assess that meaning’s relevance to the poem as a whole” (English).
- Consider grading these using a portfolio system, point system, or “check+, Check, check-” system. Or use “primary trait” scoring--grade the paper only on how successfully the student accomplished the learning asked for in the prompt.
- Make assignments short and able to be completed and graded quickly.
- Make the assignments *ad hoc*--placed strategically in the curriculum to accomplish a specific goal.
- Collect the assignments but don’t grade them formally; if you comment, comment on content rather than sentence errors.
- Consider collecting all the writing-to-learn assignments periodically rather than each time an assignment is due; have the students keep a writing portfolio.
- Where appropriate, have students collaborate on assignments or share work they’ve completed.
- Don’t read and comment on everything. Of course you’re overworked, but that doesn’t mean you must underwork your students.

Below are some suggestions for quick assignments which engage students rigorously, catching them at the point of learning.

In-Class Activities

Timed, Focused Freewrites. Have students respond to a question in writing for five minutes at strategic times: at the beginning of class to jump-start discussion; in the middle of class to recharge depleted batteries; at the end to “close out” the class or set up the next meeting.

Class Minutes. Have a student--or two or three--keep the minutes during a class discussion and report at the end on what that student felt was really important or interesting today. This activity is good for winning participation from recalcitrant students and for exposing the dynamics of class interaction (who speaks a lot, who is silent, etc.).

Micro-Essay Quizzes. Have students write a paragraph on a question stemming from the reading. Such quizzes often stimulate better thinking than “short-answer” or “fill-in-the-blank” quizzes.

Study or Exam Questions. Have students (in groups) compose examination prompts or study questions. Ask questions like, “If you were going to write an exam question on *The Adventures of*

Huckleberry Finn, what question would you ask the class?" Suggest that you MIGHT use one of the questions on the real exam.

Group Position Statements. Pose a provocative question to the class and break the students into committees. Have each committee compose a position statement on the question, then initiate a debate on the issue.

Out-of-Class Activities

Journals. Many students relish the opportunity to write everyday in a non-threatening forum. Journal writing can of course be done in or out of class, and it needn't be heavily structured. Indeed, "free" entries, in which students formulate responses to or reflections upon their experiences in life generally or college specifically, are rich learning experiences in themselves. If you do wish to structure journaling activities, here are some ideas:

- Make the journal into a reading log--have students frame questions about the reading, record their feelings about or reactions to a selection, answer questions you assign, etc.
- Pose provocative questions about current events, life at the University, or life generally for your students to answer. Let students philosophize.
- Have students write back to you when they receive your comments on their work.
- Let students have fun with metaphors. Have them complete sentences like the following: "Life is like a _____, because _____."
- Encourage students to write poetry.
- Use the journal to reinforce grammatical or rhetorical principles. Have the students find examples of published sentences, paragraphs, or longer pieces, paste them in the journal, and write a paragraph discussing the text's use of semi-colons, topic sentences, or whatever.

The 25-Word Abstract. Say, "Please read essay X for tomorrow; then write a 25-word precis stating the major point or theme of the essay--exactly 25 words, no more and no less." Such abstracts encourage creativity and also take almost no time to read.

Response Papers or Paragraphs. Have students turn in brief "open" responses to readings. Ask them to summarize the key assertion(s) in the reading and then offer their own positions on the issue.

Letters. Have students write informal letters to you or to their classmates. Such letters can of course be on any topic. You might want to frame questions about the reading or about the students' writing (if they're working on a formal essay) so that you can gain a sense of the students' state of knowledge on how their writing is progressing. Students might exchange the letters (perhaps with students in another class) on class topics or topics relevant to their lives or to the campus scene.