

Using Writing-to-Learn Assignments to Actively Engage Students in the Learning Process



By The Center for Teaching Excellence

Why Use Writing-to-Learn Activities?

Why have your students do in-class or homework-related writing exercises, even those that you don't grade? The reasons are well grounded in research. Firstly, writing about the material helps students learn it better and retain it longer—whatever the subject and whether the exercise involves note-taking, outlining, summarizing, recording focused thought, composing short answers, or writing full-fledged essays. The power of writing is making students *think actively* about the material. Secondly, because practice makes perfect, any writing can improve your students' writing skills. They can reap this benefit in any discipline, as long as you explain the appropriate writing format and provide models, practice assignments, and plenty of feedback. Some forms of writing also call for a well defined audience other than the instructor, and these develop students' sensitivity to the interests, values, cognitive levels, and vocabularies of different sectors of society. A third reason to have your students write is for classroom assessment—that is, to find out *quickly*, while you are still focusing on a particular topic, exactly what your class is and isn't learning. This way you can diagnose and clarify points of confusion *before* you give the next exam and move on to other topics. In fact, the student feedback and questions that writing exercises provide can plan a good part of your classes for you. Finally, many writing exercises give students the chance to learn about themselves—their feelings, values, cognitive processes, and their learning strengths and weaknesses.

(Section extracted from Linda B. Nilson's "Writing-to-Learn Activities and Assignments" from *Teaching At Its Best*, pg. 141)

When Should They Be Implemented?

Writing-to-learn activities can be implemented at several points during a given class period:

- **The Beginning:** Writing-to-learn activities serve well as class openers, bringing students back into the context of your course from their "other lives."

A writing-to-learn activity creates an expectation that students need to pay attention and arrive to class prepared, and it helps the instructor diagnose how much students have retained from the previous class period. Alternatively, class openers can prepare students for the new material by giving them the opportunity to draft definitions of key terms that have not yet been taught. At the end of class they can revise these definitions and can see what they have learned.

- **The Middle:** Having students engage in a writing-to-learn activity in the middle of a class can revive students by changing the pace of the lecture or discussion. It can also encourage students to participate by allowing them to brainstorm and write about particular questions or issues that they can then share with their peers during the remainder of the period.
- **The End:** End-of-class activities help students identify what they have learned and what they are confused about so they can take responsibility for the content well before the next formal assignment or exam. In addition, a brief writing activity at the end of class will help students to better comprehend and retain the material addressed in class that day.

What Types of Writing-to-Learn Activities Can I Do?

The following list contains some valuable writing-to-learn activities and assignments:

- **Free Writes:** "Students write about a predetermined topic for a brief, specified number of minutes (one to three). The objective is to activate prior knowledge or to generate ideas by free association, disregarding grammar, spelling, punctuation, and the like. Free writes serve as effective warm-up exercises for any class." (Nilson 141-2)
- **One-Minute Paper:** "With books and notebooks closed, students summarize

- the ‘most important’ or ‘most useful’ point(s) they learned from the day’s lecture, reading assignment, laboratory, or discussion. Time permitting, they also write down questions that remain in their minds. While called a ‘one-minute paper,’ the exercise usually requires two or three minutes. Just as free writes can function as a warm-up, a one-minute paper can serve as a ‘cool-down.’ It helps students absorb, digest, and internalize new material.” (142)
- **Letters Home:** “Students paraphrase in informal language what they are learning in a course in the form of a letter to their parents, a sibling, or a friend. This technique helps students see the relationship between course material/projects and their everyday lives. It also gives them the opportunity to describe the material in their own words, thus to distill, internalize, and remember the major points.” (144)
 - **Mock Tests:** Students make up a test that centers on the material they are covering in class, sharing and discussing their test questions with their peers. This not only encourages students to review and *think about* the material before a test but also enables students to identify what they believe to be the key concepts and relationships in a body of material. If they miss the mark, they will find out in class *before* the test.
 - **Drafts for Peer Feedback:** Students prepare pre-final drafts of written work (essays, lab reports, proposals, papers, etc.). Peer feedback not only provides students with more varied, immediate, and frequent feedback than any one instructor can give, but also helps students develop communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and life-long learning skills. Since the validity, reliability, and accuracy of peer feedback can be uneven, provide students with questions or prompts that are emotionally neutral and require each student to identify features or parts of the work, as he or she sees them, or to give personal reactions to the work.

(Section adapted from Linda B. Nilson’s “Writing-to-Learn Activities and Assignments” from *Teaching At Its Best*, pgs. 141-46)

How Do I Grade These Activities?

How do you find time to respond to extra student writing? Virginia Johnson Anderson (Towson University) provides the following suggestions for responding to informal writing. You might choose some combination of these suggestions in the same course to keep the workload reasonable and yet provide regular feedback to students.

- Just check off that students completed task
- Grade for one specific idea on + or – basis
- Read and write one positive comment
- Read and offer one suggestion
- Grade selected or random responses
- Have students select certain pieces to be graded (e.g., 3 out of 5 assignments)
- Have groups submit one collaborative piece of writing
- Have students re-read and self-assess according to a list of criteria you provide
- Have students discuss what they have written with a peer in order to get feedback according to criteria you provide

Ultimately, the act of writing encourages students to slow down and take the time to make explicit connections, retrieve memories, and examine evidence. Through writing-to-learn activities students are encouraged to discover new meanings and encode new ideas in long-term memory by actually *practicing thinking*. This practice lends itself to observation and analysis in that writing provides “footprints.” Students can thus review their own thinking, and teachers can use these footprints to follow the path of their students’ learning process.

Further Reading

- Angelo, T. A. & Cross, K. P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers* (2nd Ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Elbow, P. (1994). Writing for learning—not just for demonstrating learning. *National Teaching & Learning Forum*.
<http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/writing.htm>
- Nilson, L. B. (2003). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors* (2nd Ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.