

Quick and Dirty Writing Assignments for Learning

Automatic Writing: (also known as Freewriting) Writing without thinking or editing. Have students write for five to ten minutes everything they know, would like to know, assume or associate with a particular topic. This can be done at any time during class:
Before a topic has been taught: Generate interest and invested inquiry from the students (Once they have specific questions, they are listening with intent.) **During** a lesson: Students remember/ understand more deeply when they can parse information into discreet units and periodically paraphrase or reflect what they've learned. **After** content delivery: At the close of class, ask students to write any questions or confusion they have about the lesson or its applications- these can be turned in and used to plan the next lesson.

Read and Recall: After automatic writing, have students read their writing aloud to each other- in pairs or triads. Ask them to listen and record whatever they are reminded of: something else they know, would like to know or associate with the topic.

Read and Respond: Same as above, but students attempt to answer each other's questions.

Matrix: (Great for thesis development) Topics are in horizontal rows. The vertical columns represent movements through levels of reasoning; either from generalized to specific or specific to general. This exercise helps students either develop generalized statements or theses from feelings about specific incidents/examples etc. or find concrete examples that support their conclusions. It may look like this:

Topic	Feeling/Impression	Example	Reason
Academic Tracking	It's wrong	Mike Rose found his love of literature in 11 th grade. Strict tracking might have kept him out of academia forever.	Students develop at different rates for different reasons. Tracking doesn't allow for this.

Mindmap: Write topics in circles connected by lines representing their relationship, or use post-its on the wall, possibly connected by string, so you can make different subjects the focus/center of the mindmap. Then have student's write a summary of their connections and justify their choice for the center position. This exercise is especially good for kinesthetic learners.

“Inkshedding”: Students freewrite for 5 minutes, then pass their writing to a neighbor. Students read what they've received and spend 5 minutes writing a response. This goes through several iterations – 20-25 minutes, until students have begun a sort of dialogue with each other. Afterwards, you can ask students, even shy students, to share something from their “notebook”. (It doesn't have to be something they've written.)

Question Based Lectures: If your lecture is based around a few key questions, the students can take notes in response to these questions. If you end lecture with a quiz that

asks students to answer one of these questions, they will be compelled to take comprehensive notes.

Designing Assignments

Linking Goals and Process:

What are the uses and forms of writing in your discipline?
What are the criteria of these communications? Brevity? Clarity? Style? Repetition?
How can you design assignments that encourage these?

How do you personally use writing to learn? Notes, journals, outlines, marginalia, a series of post-its framing your monitor? Have you ever written your way into a paper? Discovered your real thesis in the conclusion paragraph of a first draft?
How might your own process inform the assignments you design for students?

A clear writing assignment has:

- **Defined parameters:** the topic, scope or activity is limited and specific. It's useful to organize an essay or research project around a single question such as, "What effect did the Revolution have on the urban geography of Paris?" this does not preclude sub-questions, such as, "How did Napoleon prepare the city for further rioting?" But it should be clear, through emphasis or typography, which question students should focus on.
- **Specific Audience:** All communication is crafted for a particular audience- see "Audience" in "Key Components of Argument."
- **Goals:** Tell your students why they're writing. What skills are you expecting them to develop? How are these skills related to the larger goals of the course?
- **Explicit Requirements:** If it's relevant, give students a list of what will make their paper complete or satisfactory- e.g. two outside sources, a bibliography, five quotes from class readings, a representation of and rebuttal to a counter argument, etc.
- **Source Guidelines:** Including which sources are appropriate and how to cite them.
- **A Rubric:** What are your criteria for grading? What constitutes an A, B, C, etc. paper?
- **Formatting Instructions:** Seriously- font, margins, spacing (spacing between letters is sometimes an issue.) Or, if you have no preferences for formatting, specify word count.
- **Clear Terminology:** When you ask students to do a close reading- or an analysis- when you ask them to discuss, or compare, do they know what you mean? At what point were these terms explained to you, and how likely are your students to have heard a similar explanation?

Assignment Vocabulary Based on Bloom's Taxonomy of Thinking Skills

Bloom's Taxonomy divides educational objectives into three "domains:" Affective, Psychomotor, and Cognitive. Within each domain are different levels of learning, with higher levels considered more complex and closer to complete mastery of the subject matter. A goal of Bloom's Taxonomy is to motivate educators to focus on all three domains, creating a more holistic form of education.

Knowledge

List, Name, Identify, Show, Define, Recognize, Recall, State, Visualize

Comprehension

Summarize, Explain, Interpret, Describe, Compare, Paraphrase, Differentiate, Demonstrate, Classify

Application

Solve, Illustrate, Calculate, Use, Interpret, Relate, Manipulate, Apply, Modify

Analysis

Analyze, Organize, Deduce, Contrast, Compare, Distinguish, Discuss, Plan, Devise

Synthesis

Design, Hypothesize, Support, Schematize, Write, Report, Justify

Evaluation

Evaluate, Choose, Estimate, Judge, Defend, Criticize

Words we assume our students know: Can any of these function in a theoretical vacuum? What do they mean in your discipline?

Interpret:

Define:

Explain:

Demonstrate:

Analyze:

Discuss:

Support:

Report:

Evaluate:

Criticize/Defend:

Skills for Sequenced Writing:

What is sequenced writing? A series of smaller writing assignments that follow a sequence of increasing complexity and end in a cumulative project that integrates all the skills learned

Why use it? This strategy drastically reduces plagiarism, teaches students the process of writing large projects like research papers and argumentative essays, and improves the quality of their work- and their learning- often because they have had more time to digest and consider the material than an all night cram session affords.

Summarize: Extract the most important points from another author's argument. Remember that the most valuable part of summary can be discovering what you don't understand. If students are having trouble with comprehension, or if they find the article simplistic or "boring" start with their impressions or affective reactions to the writing and ask them to connect those impressions to specific moments in the text. **Activity:** Students select, or highlight, the most important statements- **or most provocative-** from the reading and write a few sentences explaining why they choose what they did.

Paraphrase/Explain: Translating the argument into their (or someone else's) language. Students can simply re-iterate or they might communicate to a particular audience: novice, expert, outsider, someone from another discipline. **Activity:** ask students to defend an argument/theory to a hostile audience. This facilitates comprehension and encourages them to select information or pieces of the argument/text relevant to a specific purpose.

Using Quotation: Students often have trouble integrating quotes from other writers into their arguments. They know they are supposed to use quotes but may not know why this is a requirement, or when paraphrasing is more appropriate. Emphasize that quotes are not meant to re-iterate, but rather illuminate or exemplify. The language of the specific quote should be important to/analyzed in the paper: **Activity:** have students list quotes they believe support their argument and 1) paraphrase the quote 2) explain/defend why they think that the specific language of the quote is necessary to their paper or more expedient than paraphrase.

Evaluating Evidence/ Sources: Which criteria should student's use to determine what evidence is admissible in your field- or for the assignment. Does personal experience count? Is information from popular articles relevant? What about television? Do hypothetical examples count? How might a student recognize solid research vs. sketchy numbers? This is another skill that's well served by an annotated bibliography. **Activity:** Ask students to evaluate their sources using the following questions:

1. Who is the audience for this article?
2. What is the author's purpose in writing the article?
3. What credentials does the writer have?
4. What are the author's one or two main arguments/conclusions in the article?

5. What evidence does the author present to support these arguments/conclusions? Do you find these sources reliable and convincing?

Analysis: Help students pull apart the text, argument, event etc. / "break it down" into component parts, abstract principles. **Activity:** This is tricky. Analysis means something different in every discipline. We always analyze within a certain theoretical framework (see previous section on "Assignment Vocabulary") and so, when we ask students to analyze something, we must provide further context, e.g. analyze the movie Jackass in terms of Freud's stages of development. To give you a sense of how different fields approach analysis, here are several definitions:

Content analysis:

A systematic analysis of the content rather than the structure of a communication, such as a written work, speech, or film, including the study of thematic and symbolic elements to determine the objective or meaning of the communication.

Conceptual analysis:

Breaking down or analyzing concepts into their constituent parts in order to gain knowledge or a better understanding of a particular philosophical issue in which the concept is involved (Beaney 2003). For example, the problem of free will in philosophy involves various key concepts, including the concepts of freedom, moral responsibility, determinism, ability, and so on. The method of conceptual analysis tends to approach such a problem by breaking down the key concepts pertaining to the problem and seeing how they interact.

Musical analysis:

In between description and prescription. Description consists of simple non-analytical activities such as labeling chords with Roman numerals or tone-rows with integers or row-form, while the other extreme, prescription, consists of "the insistence upon the validity of relationships not supported by the text." Analysis must, rather, provide insight into listening without forcing a description of a piece that cannot be heard.

Image (Art) Analysis:

Examining visual representations for artistic intent, viewer interpretation, and cultural definitions. Artistic language can be read through theories such as semiotics (the study of signs and codes) and the recognition of design elements (colors, perspective, etc.). Analysis then goes further in the recognition of the individual viewer and their own perspectives of meaning, as well as cultural influences on the ways in which an image is defined by its placement, medium of production, and categorization (or breaking out of culturally defined categories). This cultural influence combines the artistic intent and universal language of images with the local aspects specific to one's immediate environment (Geertz, 1973). As such, analysis informs the observer about artistic design, universal readings, her own personal views, and cultural and historical layers of meaning.

Argument: What is the difference between argument and opinion? What makes an argument "sound" or reasonable? How do you determine if a claim is worth arguing/important or "at issue"?

Key Components of Argument:

- 1) **Audience:** All arguments begin with the audience.
For example: The question “Why can’t take bread without paying for it?” A convincing, relevant response to this question will depend on whether a middle-class toddler or Jean Valjean is asking. Javert wouldn’t ask the question- he already agrees that you cannot take bread without paying for it.
- 2) **Premise:** The argument must start with what is agreed upon; assumptions held by the author and all members of the audience.
Such as: “all children have biological mothers”, “ice cream is delicious” or “ citizens should have a say in their government.” Of course, these get complicated fairly quickly (ex. What does it mean to “ have a say”? What is the extent of that “say”?)
- 3) **Component Arguments:** All arguments are made of mini arguments that link evidence to conclusions.
Ice cream is delicious breaks into: 1) People have a biological need for fat because it insulates and stores energy that can be used during lean times. 2) Our body craves fat because it is beneficial to our health and was once scarce. 3) Ice cream is high in fat and so our body craves it. 4) Because our body needs the high fat content of ice- cream, we find it delicious
- 4) **Evidence:** Like premises, evidence must be acceptable to your audience.
Which of these are permissible evidence in your field: personal experience, empirical data, probable hypotheticals, etc. For example, in a discussion of medical testing, the difference between stem cells and animals may be a soul. In order for this evidence to be convincing the audience must agree that 1) the soul exists and 2) that the presence or lack of a soul is justification for experimenting on animals, but not stem cells.
- 5) **Counter-Arguments:** Effective rebuttal requires response to the core value.
The core value justifies the objection- For example: There are several potential objections to Federal Funding for space exploration. One might say that the universe is so vast, nothing of tangible value will be found: the objection is to futility. If, the objection is that there are more pressing uses for the money, like hunger relief, the essential issue is one of competing values.
In the first case, one might counter that the federal government supports the arts though their value is difficult to demonstrate. In the second case, one might argue that there is no precedent for distribution of resources based on most-pressing needs, and the federal government is equally responsible to provide for the long- term needs of its citizens; dissolution of the space program might cause the country to miss a discovery that would bring in millions in revenue.
Neither of these arguments is water tight, but they *directly* address their counter arguments. Whereas, if I responded to the later objection (pragmatism) by saying that recent space exploration has uncovered traces of life on one of Jupiter’s moons... While this information is interesting, it would not convince, or sway someone who’s main interest/value is pragmatism.

The matrix exercise is very helpful for developing counter arguments.

Topic	Objection	Value	Response
Federal funding for Space exploration	Useful results are unlikely	Efficiency/ tangible value	The arts are funded- they have benefit that’s less tangible
“	There are more pressing public needs	Utilitarianism	

Kinds of Writing

Effective assignments mimic real life writing situations and each kind of writing develops different cognitive skills.

Journal: Personal informal responses to class notes, reading, lecture etc. These can be more or less directed. Or you can give your students a certain amount of time in class to write/ gather their thoughts etc.

Persona: Assign students a character, as Galileo, a defense of his theories to the Pope, or, as Foucault, writing a letter to Michael Gerson.

Letter to the Editor: Respond to an article in terms of the argumentative methods and author's selection/representation of facts. This is a great exercise for improving reading comprehension: it encourages meta-cognition by asking students to connect their feelings or impressions to specific pieces of text- they begin to examine the *means* of argument as well as the content.

Editorial: Writing that is designed to convince a large audience, the general public.

Cases or Word Problems: Write problems for other students to solve. This is another version of teach to learn; in designing the problem, students learn what the component parts are and the practical value of the information/skill/method/ theory etc.

Instruction Manuals: This exercise requires students to identify and describe the parts of a process, a repeating activity, an event, consultation etc. An excellent model for this is video game guide/ walk-through.

Dialogues: Encourages a deep understanding of multiple perspectives. Students practice developing and responding to counter-arguments.

Reviews: Of an article, book, film etc. Ask students to identify the values of your genre or discipline and consider sources in these terms. Note: This activity requires explicit instructions so review won't turn into summary. Be explicit about the criteria for review.

Trade/ Discipline Specific Papers: Judicial Opinions, White Papers, Development or Research Proposals, Marketing Analyses. These allow students to practice the professional writing of their field.

Annotated Bibliography: (See "Quotes" section on skills for sequenced writing.) In addition to helping students evaluate sources, these can encourage students to extract/ summarize relevant information from a whole book or article.

Definitions or Rules: This activity is woefully under-used. We assume that definitions are just about recollection but they can be quite complex. For example "What is a universal human right?" or " What is a public health risk?" Creating rules can help make

the implicit, explicit- for example " What are the rules of first meetings between people?" " What are the rules regarding asking someone on a date?" "What are the rules for responding to a violation of these rules?"

Interview Questions: Students identify which issues are “at-stake”. They can also combine this with persona writing and have dialogues in class or on Blackboard where one student is the interviewer and one is the author, theorist, historical figure etc. the class is studying.

Blog/ “Civilian Journalism”: Blogs are a relatively new form. They are characterized by reference density, not only in terms of number of sources, but rich connections between sources. They are often done journal style, not only in terms of format, daily entries etc. but, for the most part, their tone is more conversational than academic.

Comic Book/ Graphic Novel: These are not just for narratives- there are historical comic books- comic books that explain math or philosophy. These are excellent for students who are visually, aesthetically oriented- and probably even better for those that aren't.

Biographical/ Historical Sketch: Have students write a short description of an event or person in their own life who exemplifies or illustrates course material. For example, student could write, in a course on semiotics, about their associations with the golden arches, or about learning to read. **This activity is extremely useful because it grounds difficult concepts in the affective center of the brain, where deeper understanding occurs and information is more likely to stick.**

Peer Editing: A Disclaimer

The most common misconception about peer editing is that students will improve each other's writing directly, or suggest improvements to each other's papers. While this may be true of some student pairs, more often peer-editing allows students to:

1) Become better readers/editors of their own work. By reading other papers that are “in-process” they begin to recognize what works and doesn't work, e.g. what makes a transition effective, or ineffective.

2) Reflect their understanding of the argument as it is presented. Often, the connections between disparate pieces of material are so clear to us that we forget to make explicit connections in our writing, a pair of fresh eyes can point us to gaping holes in our reasoning.

Always give students directions for peer editing- a worksheet, or list of questions to answer, etc. Be detailed in your questions and make them accountable for the quality of their peer edits- at least in so far as their comments indicate careful consideration.

Some Useful Questions for Peer Editors:

1) What is the main point, in one sentence?

- 2) What is the subtopic/sub-argument of each paragraph?
- 3) Do you “buy” each sub- argument? Why or why not?
- 4) Do their sources seem legitimate? Are quotes well integrated and necessary?
- 5) Where are you confused? What clarifying questions would you ask?
- 6) Can you offer any reasonable counter- arguments?