

Writing to Learn: Assigning Un-graded Writing

Plato argues in the Phaedrus that the technology of writing ruins the memory, but his opinion obviously has not been the last word on the subject. Walter Pauk, author of *How to Study in College*, says "A good technique to ensure understanding is to recite or write the author's ideas in your own words. If you cannot, then you do not understand them."

Pauk concludes, "You cannot form a clear and correct memory trace from a fuzzy, poorly understood concept" (65).

This connection between writing and understanding is the foundation for a category of writing assignments called "Writing- to-Learn." These assignments include different types of journals and notebooks, correspondence, problem-solving, question-posing, free writing, lecture and reading summaries, expressive and exploratory writing. The emphasis is on understanding and learning, not correctness or form, and in most cases it is not necessary to grade them. Often they are simply counted or checked off.

Free writing

Free writing is probably the easiest to implement of all writing-to-learn activities. In its basic form free writing is simply writing down everything that comes to mind, usually for five or ten minutes without stopping. "Focused" free writing, which uses some kind of prompt—a term, an issue, a question, or a problem—is probably the most useful type for a discipline-based course.

Free writing can be used to interrupt a class lecture for a change of pace; it shifts the learners into a participant role, clearing out a little space for students to interact with the ideas thrown at them.

Metacognition

"Metacognitive" process writing, in which the writer observes and records how he or she reads, takes an exam, works on a problem, writes a paper, or thinks about an issue is a useful diagnostic tool. Such writing records one's own learning behavior, allowing one to reflect on possible problems and strategies for improvement. Describing exactly how the wrong answer was achieved helps students and teachers recognize where things went wrong and why.

Un-graded Writing

Even un-graded writing serves learning. For example, each student could write down a question about some aspect of the material he or she does not understand. The questions are passed around until each student has a problem he or she can answer. The responses are then passed back to the original writers, for evaluation and perhaps discussion. In both asking and answering a question the learning of each student has been increased, even without a response from the instructor.

A variation on the above assignment is the "question box" in which the most important questions can be dropped anonymously. These questions become a feedback system; a gauge for the instructor of how well the students are assimilating the material, and what areas need further work.

Double-Entry Journals

Of course, the assignments mentioned above can be gathered together in a "learning log" or other type of journal. A more powerful type of journal is the "double-entry" or "dialogic" journal in which students copy down quotes, facts, or concepts from the lecture or the textbooks in one column, and write responses, questions and insights in the next column or on the facing page. In this way the writer engages in an ongoing dialogue with the material, an

ancient but still essential activity of serious intellectual life in any academic field or profession.

Question of the Day

Some instructors use a "question of the day" format for their journal assignments, sometimes with a very sophisticated assignment sequence. In fact, Susan Peck MacDonald and Charles R. Cooper, two researchers at the University of California, San Diego, found that this structured approach was significantly more effective than the looser double-entry journal described above. The course involved in their study was "Chinese Literature in Translation," but their procedures would work for almost any course.

The journal prompts included: "(1) bottom-up questions, asking students to form inductive generalizations based on concrete events or scenes in the stories; (2) top-down questions, offering a variety of generalizations, one of which students chose to support with evidence from a story; (3) synthetic questions, asking for generalizations tying together elements from more than one story; and (4) reflection on the process of writing claims and using evidence" (Herrington and Moran Writing, Teaching 143).

Another Approach

Kathryn H. Martin, a professor at SUNY Oswego, uses a similar assignment sequence in her Human Biology course, a lecture format class with about 50 students per section. In her class the writing assignments, which she calls "micro themes," are optional. The micro themes are designed to help those who do not do well on the objective tests, which count 200 points. Each of the 36 micro themes is worth 15 points, which can be used to supplement the exam scores. At first she thought that about 10% would do the writing, but it turned out that about half the students participated.

Each response is limited to one page typed, or two pages handwritten. The responses are read for content, not grammar or punctuation. If the response is considered acceptable, she gives a checkmark, making written comments only occasionally. Unacceptable responses can be rewritten (Connolly and Vilardi Writing to Learn 115-16).

Any Course, Any Time

Writing can be used at any point in a course for posing questions, and for defining problems, issues, and key terms in a personal way. At the end of a lecture, writing can improve retention of the material through helping to organize and clarify it. In the form of correspondence, either with the professor or with fellow students, writing helps identify gaps in understanding, as the writer attempts to articulate the material to an audience.

Further Reading

Two useful books with lots of ideas for integrating writing activities into courses are *writing to Learn: Mathematics and Science* edited by Paul Connolly and Teresa Vilardi, and *Writing, Teaching, and Learning in the Disciplines* edited by Anne Herrington and Charles Moran.