Writing to Learn
CETL Workshop
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What is it?

Generally, writing-to-learn activities are short (no more than 10-15 minutes), impromptu or otherwise informal writing tasks that help students think through key concepts or ideas presented in a course. Often, these writing tasks are limited to less than five minutes of class time or are assigned as brief, out-of-class assignments. Because writing-to-learn activities are crucial to many WAC programs (because they best meet teaching goals through writing), this guide presents a great deal of information on writing to learn (WTL), including a detailed rationale, examples, and logistical tips.

Although how writing fosters critical thinking is not clear (Applebee), theoreticians and practitioners alike agree that writing promotes both critical thinking and learning (See Adams, Britton, Bruner, Emig, Herrington, Knoblauch and Brannon, Odell, Parker on the linked bibliography.) As Toby Fulwiler and Art Young explain in their "Introduction" to Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum:

> Writing to communicate--or what James Britton calls "transactional writing"--means writing to accomplish something, to inform, instruct, or persuade. . . . Writing to learn is different. We write to ourselves as well as talk with others to objectify our perceptions of reality; the primary function of this "expressive" language is not to communicate, but to order and represent experience to our own understanding. In this sense language provides us with a unique way of knowing and becomes a tool for discovering, for shaping meaning, and for reaching understanding. (p. x)

In "Writing to Learn Means Learning to Think," Syrene Forsman makes the same point, but she directs her attention not to a theoretical justification but a practical rationale for writing to learn:

> As teachers we can choose between (a) sentencing students to thoughtless mechanical operations and (b) facilitating their ability to think. If students' readiness for more involved thought processes is bypassed in favor of jamming more facts and figures into their heads, they will stagnate at the lower levels of thinking. But if students are encouraged to try a variety of thought processes in classes, they can, regardless of their ages, develop considerable mental power. Writing is one of the most effective ways to develop thinking. (p. 162)

The Consequences of Writing by Robert P. Parker and Vera Goodkin is an especially good resource on writing to learn. Following a detailed discussion of the theoretical links between language (especially writing) and learning, these authors outline projects that focus on writing in entomology, clinical nursing, psychology, and mathematics, all with similar results: students learned key concepts and understood material more fully while also practicing some features of discourse for the specified discourse community. Thus, writing to learn can have additional positive effects in helping students mature as effective communicators even though the initial goal is to help students become better learners.

Examples of WTL Activities

Writing to learn activities can happen frequently or infrequently in your class; some can extend over the entire semester; some can be extended to include a wide variety of writing tasks in different formats and to different audiences.

- The reading journal
- Generic and focused summaries
- Annotations
- Response papers
- Synthesis papers
- The discussion starter
  - If you know a particular reading assignment is likely to give students trouble, you might plan questions in advance. But even if students' frustration catches you by surprise, you can easily ask questions about the key issues or points in the article. Moreover, asking students to answer the same questions again at the end of the class, after you've had a chance to discuss the reading, will help you see what students still don't understand.
- Focusing a discussion
- The learning log
- Analyzing the process
- Problem statement
- Solving real problems
  - Ask individuals or groups to analyze a real problem--gleaned from industry reports, scientific journals, personal experience, management practices, law, etc. Students must write about the problem and a solution they could implement.
- Pre-test warm-ups
- Using Cases
  - A simple use of the case is to set up a single scenario which notes the audience, purpose, and focus of a brief writing task.
- Letters
- 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.
- Analysis of events
- Project notebooks
- The writing journal

How to Evaluate WTL

Because they are informal and often impromptu, writing-to-learn activities usually aren't marked for correctness. Rather, teachers or classmates quickly read the writing for a general sense of what students understand and don't understand. Because most teachers cannot read through and comment on every WTL activity students complete, I suggest the following alternatives:

- Use an occasional WTL warm-up at the beginning of class as a "quiz." Pick up a single sheet of paper or glance at a computer screen and comment briefly on students' grasp of a reading assignment or key concepts.
- Pick up WTL material from five-ten students every day or every other day. Don't read every word, but skim quickly to identify tasks students might need help with--a reading that bogged down in class discussion, a page that has very little written, a page that has lots written.
- Use different colored pens or highlighters to note points in selected entries. One color means "good idea," one means "consider pursuing this idea as a paper topic," another means "come back to this idea again and explore it in more detail," and so on.
- While students are writing at the beginning and end of class, walk around the room and read over shoulders. This technique is especially easy if you have students writing on computers. Stop to talk to or jot a note on the writing of 3-4 students. If students don't like having you read over shoulders, ask them to select a few recent WTL activities and put those to one side for you to collect and read quickly.
- Ask students to select their best or most provocative WTL writing for you to review.
- Ask students to share WTL activities with one or two classmates.
- Ask students to send the WTL writing that contains questions about course material to you over e-mail.
- Ask students to post provocative questions or summary/analysis of readings on an electronic bulletin board or Web forum for class comment.

Logistical Tip: Always have students use loose-leaf paper, not a spiral bound notebook. Students might misplace some of their writing, but teachers can much more easily pick up single pages to review.

Using Computer-Mediate WTL

If you teach in a computer classroom, or if students have easy access to computers outside of class, WTL activities of all sorts can be adapted for computer writing. What kinds of WTL tasks have I found most useful?

- Summarize and respond to readings
- Summarize key points from prior class
- Pose problems based on class material
- Clarify unclear points in reading or class
- Plan writing or speaking projects
- Discover potential audiences
- Practice format for assignments and projects

- Record observations over time
- Define key terms
- Record round-robin comments for inductive learning
- Organize group-response sheets
- Capture peer review of drafts in progress