

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

- 5 Minute Paper
- The muddiest point
- One sentence summary

Who _____

Does what _____

To what or whom _____

When _____

Where _____

How _____

Why _____

Sample Writing to Learn Activities

The following 16 activities are helpful for incorporating formative writing into any class. Many of the ideas are written versions of oral activities. An advantage for incorporating these writing activities into your course is that every student will have a response, not just the ones who are called on orally. It is a more effective way of ensuring that all students are involved. Try using all of them at various times. Each activity is self-explanatory and takes only a few minutes.

1. START-UP WRITE

Students regularly write for the first five minutes of class time each day, on the topic of the upcoming lesson. This can be the same question each day (reflection on the reading, questions I have this morning, highlights from the homework etc.) or may be in response to a specific question or quote put on the board by the instructor. This activity works especially well to begin a class, since it causes students to break social contact, look down at their writing, tune in to the lesson, gather thoughts, and get centered.

2. “K-W-L-(A)” WRITE

When a new topic is being introduced (or reviewed or assessed) students make a list of all the things they already know (or believe they know) about the topic. Then they make a list of things they want to know and investigate. When the lesson is done, they make a list of what they have learned. You may extend to “Apply”—how will you apply this information in the future.

3. LIST-STORMING

This is the written version of brainstorming. Here, the students quickly write down everything that they know, believe, or feel about a given subject, without editing or second-guessing themselves. Later, lists can be used in many ways: pairs or teams can compare and discuss their lists; frequently tallies for certain items can be totaled and announced, etc.

4. FACT/VALUES LISTS

When a new topic is being introduced, students begin by making two lists side by side; on the left, things they know to be facts about the topic—on the right, things they believe, feel, or suspect about it. Later in the lesson, students can check back to validate their facts and values.

5. INSTRUCTIONS/DIRECTIONS

The “how to” is one of the most primitive and inherently engaging forms of writing. Classroom possibilities: how to conduct a science experiment, how to build a birdhouse, how to hem a skirt, how to plan a battle strategy, or how to solve a quadratic equation. Notice the natural audience possibilities. Notice also that evaluation means: can the reader do the task, based upon the instructions I wrote?

6. CLUSTERING-Mind mapping

A special form of writing-to-learn using a kind of right-brained outlining. Students put key concept, term, or name in a circle at the center of a page and then free-associate, jotting down all the ideas which occur to them in circles arrayed around the kernel term, in whatever pattern “seems right.” Often clustering reveals unrecognized connections and relationships.

7. OBSERVATION REPORTS

Science labs have always offered a special and valuable kind of composing experience: reporting data from the close observation of physical objects, processes, phenomena, and events. This sort of writing can be extended to data-gathering and observational reports in a number of other subject areas and formats. Social observation (ethnography) and interviewing are subtypes.

8. LEARNING LOG OR JOURNAL; DIAGNOSTIC LEARNING LOG

Some instructors who have become committed to writing-to-learn have formulized this approach further by asking each student to keep a continuous learning log or journal throughout the class. While some specific individual topics may be set by the instructor, the essential idea is for students to be making regular journal entries on a variety of class-related topics—three, four, or five entries per week, some in class and some at home. This document becomes a special place where the subject matter learning work of the course is both accomplished and reflected. The main point of assessing these logs is to compare your sense of what the class is and is not understanding.

9. ADMIT SLIPS

Upon entering class, students turn in short pieces of writing on a pre-assigned topic, such as a summary of the previous nights reading assignment. To begin class, the instructor may read some or all aloud (with or without names attached) or cards may be passed out randomly among students to be read aloud or discussed. Used to focus on day’s topic or upcoming activity.

10. EXIT SLIPS

As above, only reversed. Students are asked to do a short piece of writing, giving their response, summary, or questions about the day’s session. The instructor may collect and read these him/herself, or use them to teach. This is a great diagnostic tool and a natural source of quick review highlights during next class.

11. PROBLEMS, QUESTIONS, EXERCISES

Students can write their own discussion, study, essay, or even exam questions, mathematic word problems and science experiments, etc. on the material being covered. This is a great way to replace dull, rote end-of-the-chapter questions with questions that students originate because they identify them as being worth considering.

12. “STOP-N-WRITE” or PUNCTUATED LECTURE

Too often in presentation, instructors feel a need to plunge on and “cover the material,” which in fact students would benefit greatly from an occasional pause for them to write and reflect upon their thoughts. Some possible focusing questions: what I’m thinking right now; what I grasp up to this moment; questions that are bothering me (the muddiest point). This provides students a chance to consolidate what has been learned so far, and prepare to go on.

13. KEY WORD/DEFINITION

Focused free write on key word or key term: Writing definitions of the central vocabulary of a lesson. Helps to consolidate knowledge of concepts.

14. METACOGNITIVE ANALYSIS

Student writes to describe his/her own thinking process in the subject, perhaps up to the point where difficulties are encountered. Example: showing how a math problem is tackled and worked through up to the point where the student becomes stumped.

15. DIALECTICS

Divide a page in half. Left side is used for note taking during reading, lecture, or activity—the right half is used for reactions and questions. In math, one side can be used for doing problems and the other for telling in words how the students attacked the problem.

16. PREDICTING WRITES

The instructor stops students at a key point in a reading, an activity, or a lecture and invites them to write briefly (and perhaps discuss a bit) what they think will happen next.